

Respect the building

Matt Wolf's company landed a big restoration project: the Rotunda at the University of Virginia.

By MIKE PRICE

Matt Wolf took to heart the advice his grandfather gave him: never give up, do your best, and get an education. "He said you need a little bit of stubbornness to make it in this life," he recalled.

Wolf is proof of that. In July 2009, he was laid off from his job at a commercial concrete company due to the recession. A month later, he founded Centennial Preservation Group, a historic restoration and preservation firm based in Columbus.

"I knew with his work ethic and determination, it would be successful," said Matt's wife, Tina Wolf.

Successful, indeed. Centennial Preservation Group is currently working on a prestigious project: restoration of the Rotunda at the University of Virginia, a UNESCO World Heritage building.

Inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, Thomas Jefferson designed the Rotunda to represent the "authority of nature and power of reason." It was built from 1822 to 1826 as the focal point of Jefferson's Academical Village, where housing and academic buildings were grouped to promote shared learning as a part of daily life.

In 1976, the American Institute of Architects named the Academical Village the most significant achievement of architecture in the nation's first 200 years.

"It's a great project from a lot of different levels," Wolf said. "We're all really proud to have been entrusted with it, but I think it kind of raises us to a different echelon of contractors as well."

Wolf, who studied political science and economics at Ohio State, had long dreamed of starting his own business. For 12 years he worked for a local restoration company, learning the trade under historic masonry expert John P. Speweik.

He started Centennial Preservation Group in his garage, setting up shop with just a few tools, a truck, and a borrowed ladder. A little more than a year later, he had hired two employees and moved out of the garage.

The company now has 12 employees and a field office in Raleigh, N.C. It specializes in masonry, window, door, and plaster restoration work on historic buildings and older homes in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions.

Matt Wolf at the Rotunda

DAMI ADDISON







During a restoration project in Ohio, foreman Steve White stands in the hayloft of a barn built in the 1790s near Somerset in Perry County.

Wolf understands the importance of preserving places that people feel connected to as part of their identity.

“On projects, I usually get sidetracked talking to the person. I’m generally as interested or more interested in the people I get to meet as anything else,” he said.

“Bottom line is, I’m evaluating the building for problems. These projects are fun because we get to play CSI a little bit and try to figure out what’s going on.”

Centennial Preservation Group is making the first major repairs to the Rotunda since a \$2.3 million renovation in 1976. The entire building will be restored in phases over the next four to five years at a cost of \$51 million. The collaborative effort includes Christman Gilbane Joint Venture as construction manager and the architectural firm John G. Waite Associates, which has done work on the Statue of Liberty.

Eighty sashes—the upper and lower parts of 40 double-hung windows—were due to be restored by Wolf’s staff before the university’s spring commencement ceremony on May 19 on the Lawn of the Rotunda.

The workers also cleaned masonry and replaced and patched brick as necessary. The mortar joints in the upper portion of the Rotunda were repointed, and the stucco pilasters repaired.

Wolf’s crew will focus next on the lower portion of the Rotunda, tearing down the stone water table to the existing foundation and rebuilding while incorporating new copper sheet flashing.

“This is more challenging than the first phase because the building is round,” said Dave Covington, Wolf’s foreman on the project.

Scheduling of the various phases of the project has been tricky, Wolf said. One big hurdle was finishing the upper portion of the building and removing the scaffold before commencement. Working on the masonry during the winter was difficult, too. It required enclosing the scaffold in plastic and heating the entire perimeter of the building to protect it from freeze-thaw and to allow proper curing of the mortar.

“This project has a lot of pressure with it because it is so important and there are so many eyes on it,” Wolf said, “but at the same time it’s a really good group of people—from the architect to the construction manager to the university people to us.

“I think we all feel we’re in the same boat and we all have so much respect for the building.” ■

Watch a video:
[youtube.com/limeworksus](https://www.youtube.com/limeworksus)

Filmed by Sean K. Maxwell and Dan Gayle; produced by LimeWorks.us

Think local

In an effort to preserve the character of his home state, as well as keep his staff near their families, Matt Wolf enjoys completing restoration projects throughout Ohio, including maintenance on homes and churches.

Centennial Preservation Group recently restored the oldest inn on the National Road, the Brick Tavern in St. Clairsville, Ohio, built in 1825. Workers also just finished restoring a barn built in the 1790s near Somerset, Ohio.

These projects “add context to our understanding of the history of the area,” Wolf said.

Other notable projects are the William Howard Taft National Historic Site in Cincinnati, which required new plaster work, and the historically significant Cockayne farmhouse, built in 1850 in Glen Dale, W.Va., 20 miles southeast of St. Clairsville.

“I think preservation will continue to gain popularity because historic properties and neighborhoods are sustainable on both an individual basis and a city or regional planning basis,” Wolf said. “Many studies have shown preservation makes good economic sense. Plus, there’s interest simply from the standpoint of providing a sense of place and continuity of heritage.” ■